

*Dear Father in heaven,*

*With the merciful You show Yourself merciful, sincere to the one who is sincere, pure to the one who is pure, but crooked to the one who is crooked.*

*Grant that we may see as You see, not blinded by our crooked flesh but enlightened by Your Word of grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

After God saved David from Saul and his enemies, he sang this great song recorded in 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18. He declares that it was God's meekness and humility that made him great. He declares that the LORD himself will enlighten his darkness. And he declares that to the merciful, sincere, and pure, God shows himself to be merciful, sincere, and pure. But to the crooked, God shows himself to be crooked. David teaches us an important lesson about faith and unbelief. Those who believe have been enlightened by the gospel to see that God's mercy endures forever. They begin to see as God sees. The good news of Christ not only gives them joy and confidence in their salvation. It also influences their entire outlook on life. It influences the way they think, judge, and act. They have eternal life, because they know God and his only begotten Son whom he has sent. But those who don't believe, as John the Baptist says, cannot see life. They continue to walk in darkness, and the wrath of God remains on them (John 3:36).

Those who don't know the mercy of the Father can only recognize his judgments as unfair and crooked. They are left to their own reason and strength to determine what is a good measure. And this is why they can't grasp our Lord's words in his sermon to his disciples. He says, "Don't judge, and you will not be judged." These words can only be grasped and understood by a believing heart, which knows the mercy of God in Christ. To the unbelieving and carnal mind, these words remain dark and nonsensical.

The sinful flesh can't understand these words of Jesus, because the sinful flesh is judgmental. Of course, everyone stops being judgmental when he is the one being judged. As the saying goes, "A conservative is a liberal who just got robbed, and a liberal is a conservative who just got arrested." We naturally want lenience when we are the guilty ones. And we naturally want stricter justice when we are the victims of a crime. This is why people will call for tolerance for those who practice sexual perversions and murder babies, but then they will file lawsuits against those who refuse to celebrate these wicked acts. Whether you think Jesus' words mean that anything goes or you think Jesus' words are too liberal or unrealistic, in either case, we are by nature legalists. Our natural minds can't think the way God thinks. God is just. He is the supreme judge over all the earth. Yet he shows mercy. When we were still sinners and enemies of God, Christ died for us. And while he declares us, unworthy sinners, to be righteous, he remains righteous and just. It is completely contrary to our natural way of thinking.

If you want to grasp these words of Jesus, then you first need to recognize that you don't measure things the way God measures things. You aren't more righteous, just, generous, or merciful than God. These words of our Lord can only be embraced by a heart that trusts the mercy of God in Christ. You must die to your own sin, which blinds you from seeing his mercy, and you must see him as your righteousness and life.

Jesus is teaching us how the law is fulfilled. He would later rebuke the Pharisees for keeping the outward regulations of the law but neglecting the weightier things such as faithfulness, righteousness, and mercy. Jesus came to show mercy. This is what the law requires of us. But the sinful flesh can only see the law as a rulebook to keep people in line. Of course, this is what the law does. Of course, we need rules to curb bad behavior. It's why we have bedtime for our kids. It's why we have judges and

civil servants in our cities, states, and country. It's why we make schedules for ourselves and keep our bodies in check. The world needs to be governed this way. Our bodies need to be governed this way. But this is not how faith lives. No, the Christian heart and mind – the Christian conscience – is ruled only by the mercy of God in Christ. As a Christian, as a child of God, you do not owe anyone anything except to love.

But does this mean that we just ignore what God's law says? Does this mean that we embrace the abominations so often promoted in our day? The fact that we have to ask these questions proves that we still have our sinful flesh. Do we continue in sin that grace may abound? How is that possible for a Christian? How does that even enter into a Christian's mind? As St. Paul says, how can we who died to sin continue to live in it? These are only the thoughts of a fallen, sinful nature.

But faith does not come from flesh and blood. Faith is not the product of some political or moral philosophy. Faith comes from the voice of the Good Shepherd who loved us and gave his life up for us. The law is handed down for the ungodly. But a Christian is called to love. This is love, which fulfills the law, rejoices in the truth, bears with the weak, and binds us together in Christ, because this love flows out of true faith and a good conscience cleansed by the blood of Christ.

So listen to these words of your Savior. Don't judge, and you will not be judged. Don't condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. These words of Jesus need to be repeated again and again, pressed firmly on our minds, because our sinful flesh causes us to forget them so quickly. But these words of our Lord teach us how God treats us. He's merciful and forgiving. He does not deal with us according to our sins. He's generous and abundant in his gifts. He gave up his dearest treasure, even his only begotten Son, and he will certainly give to us all good things. So Jesus is teaching us to see through this light of God's mercy. The measure God has used with you is one of undeserved compassion and pity. As we walk in this mercy, relying on it by faith and pursuing it by love, then we begin to see as God sees.

But of course, Jesus knows that we still have our sinful flesh. He knows that our old Adam will stick to us until the day we die. He knows that we still get blinded by the pride of the world and the unbelief of our natural condition. He isn't blind. He sees the sins and injustices hurled against you much more clearly than you see them. And he asks us, "Can the blind lead the blind? Won't they both fall into a ditch?" In other words, can you find justice from this dying world, which is blind to the mercy of God? What peace can you achieve through your own attempts at getting even? Who will give you this peace? If your brother has injured you, so you drag him to court and get a judge to force him to give you what you are convinced he should give you, what have you gained? If your marriage is on the rocks, don't go running to the lawyer or some worldly psychologist who will only affirm you in your anger and resentment. Again, what measure of good have you gained from this? If you see that the wicked get away with their wicked plots, that property, money, livelihoods, and moral decency are stripped away in a legal yet immoral way, do you really believe you will have peace in your conscience if only the right guy gets elected?

Of course, we should pray for good judges and rulers who can judge with sound and fair judgment. Of course, we should pray for good parents, good teachers, good pastors, good employers and managers who strive to perform their duties with truth and integrity. But don't be fooled. No matter who has the power, this will not get rid of the sin of this world. No matter whose policies are more economically or

civilly useful and beneficial, none of them can get rid of greed and injustice. So don't rely on them for this. Because they are, by nature, just as blind as you are.

Instead, if you want a good conscience, if you want to walk in the light and not in blindness, then let these words of Jesus sink in. Be merciful as your Father is merciful. These words summarize the overall teaching of our Savior who also says, love one another as I have loved you. As St. John says, "This is love, not that we have loved him, but that he has loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation [the atoning sacrifice] for our sins. Dear friends, if God so loved us, then we also ought to love one another . . . We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:10-11, 19).

The love and mercy of God is in this, that he does not condemn us or hold us to the measure we deserve. Instead, he uses the measure of his grace and mercy. When you are confident that God your Father is merciful and generous toward you, then this gives you the courage to take the plank out of your own eye. The reason we want to hold onto our sins, the reason we don't want to judge ourselves, is because we are afraid of being disqualified, discredited, and condemned. It's that old fear of death, which still dwells in our dying flesh. But when you know that God forgives you for Christ's sake, when you know that God did not spare even his own Son, when you are confident that he who gives you eternal life will not withhold anything good from you, then you don't need to be afraid of judgment. You can plead guilty of your blindness, knowing that your Lord Jesus will not drive you into the ditch. You can be generous with your words, actions, and gifts, because you know that God will continue to give you much more than you deserve.

These words of our Savior are perfect words, filled with wisdom, which is practical for our daily lives. Be merciful as your Father is merciful. Only those who know his compassion can recognize the great depth of these words. They immediately expose the blindness of our carnal reason even as they strengthen our faith in his goodness. With these words, Christ trains you to think with the new mind he has given you by his Holy Spirit. He trains you to see as God sees, to judge everything with a goal of peace and reconciliation. This training is difficult. It involves dying to yourself every day as you pass through many trials and afflictions in this life. It hurts to swallow your pride and seek to be reconciled with your neighbor. It hurts to see how the wicked seem to prosper. But don't fret yourself over this. Christ is your light, and he leads you on the path of his righteousness. So listen to what David teaches us in Psalm 37, "Don't fret over those who do evil . . . Trust in the LORD and do good . . . Delight in the LORD, and He will give you your heart's desire. Commit your ways to the LORD, trust Him, and He will act for you. He will make your righteousness shine like a light and your just cause like sunshine at noon." Amen.